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CHAPTER IX

WELFARE: LAND AND LABOUR

1. The Instruments of Welfare

From the foregoing survey of colonial policy it should be evident that the promotion of welfare in tropical dependencies is not a new idea; what is new is the recognition that this requires a constructive policy with appropriate instruments of welfare. The instruments devised to promote welfare fall under two heads: economic and social. Measures under the former head aim directly at increasing production, which should enhance welfare indirectly; measures under the latter head aim directly at enhancing welfare, which should increase production indirectly. The machinery for increasing production comprises public works for the development of material resources, *la richesse naturelle*, and economic services for the development of human resources, *la richesse humaine*. The machinery of social welfare comprises services intended to protect the land and labour of tropical peoples against the adverse influence of economic forces, and services to promote health and education. It is often taken for granted that activities under all these various heads are effective in raising the standard of welfare above its native level; the next stage in our enquiry is to examine the validity of this assumption. We must try to ascertain how far public works and economic services do, in fact, increase native production; how far any such increase in production enhances native welfare; to what extent social services are effective in protecting land and labour; and how far the health and education services endow the people with new powers in body and mind. These are the questions that will engage our attention in this chapter and the next.

2. Public Works

Colonial rule is often judged by its achievements in respect of public works, such as ports, railways and irrigation, and colonial powers, in justifying their claim to exercise dominion, point to such things as proof of their beneficent activities. But it is necessary to distinguish between public works as instruments of progress and as instruments of welfare. Railways are the chief item under the head of public works, and in Africa they account for about three-quarters of the total

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653 loans raised by governments of British territories.[1] Some were constructed for strategic ends and some mainly to facilitate administration, but the usual object was to open up the interior to trade. In dependencies chiefly valued as markets for European goods, the populous districts usually lie along great rivers, and development requires little expenditure, because the waterways suffice without railways or even, as we have seen in Burma, without roads. The case is different, however, where local products are developed by western enterprise, as this prefers more sparsely peopled regions; plantations require large tracts of vacant land, and mineral deposits are mostly found in barren hilly regions. In such circumstances the cost of transport by carts or porters to remove the produce of enterprise or to supply its needs may be so formidable as to preclude development; in West Africa it was estimated in 1926 that porterage cost 2*s*. 6*d*. a ton-mile as compared with 2*d*. by rail.[2] In such circumstances, if the resources of backward regions are to be made available to the outside world, communications must be improved, and western enterprise demands the construction of railways. This opens up new and wider prospects of gain, and provides employment for western capital and labour in the colonial power. Inevitably there is a tendency to overestimate the advantages that improved communications confer upon dependent peoples, and to overlook the disadvantages. It is usually assumed that roads and railways act as an instrument of civilization and promote welfare by bringing the people into contact with the modern world, but negro slavery was formerly defended on the same grounds. Whether closer contact is beneficial depends upon its nature and the results, and where as has happened sometimes on railway construction large numbers die, or where as also has happened, a whole people fades away, it can be regarded as beneficial to them only on the ground that they are better dead.

The construction of railways was part of the campaign against slavery, and against porterage with which slavery was closely linked. The Uganda Railway, for instance, was approved by Parliament on the ground that activities against the slave trade must be extended to the interior.[3] Porterage is not only costly, but it is wasteful of labour, deadly; it is costly both in money and human life, and modern forms of transport have been acclaimed as an immense benefit to the peoples whom they free from the scourge of porterage.[4] But the matter is not quite so simple. Under native conditions, un-

[1] *African Survey*, p. 1657. [2] *Ib*. p. 1540. [3] *Ib*. pp. 1538, 1582. [4] *Ib*. p. 1539.

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touched by modern commerce, there was little need for porters, and slavery was in general merely a form of domestic or agricultural service that, under the conditions then obtaining, best provided for the welfare of the labourer.[1] It was the impact of the West, and the consequent liberation of economic forces from the restraining influence of custom, that changed the character of slavery and multiplied the evils of porterage. In Africa 'during the early days of European occupation large demands were made on the population for the supply of porters, with the inevitable result of much suffering and a large loss of life; and it is further clear that the extensive use of human porterage was responsible for the spread of forms of disease which had hitherto been local in their incidence'.[2] So far as economic progress renders slavery and porterage unnecessary, it is removing evils for which in great part it has been responsible. Moreover, it is notorious that road building and railway construction have, at least for the time being, aggravated the abuse of compulsory labour. 'The wide use of impressed labour for railway construction in Africa has, in the past, led to many incidents which have reflected great discredit on the administration', and quite recently the death rate on such work has been 'exceedingly high'. A French writer, commenting on the heavy burden of compulsory labour imposed on the current generation in improving communications, offers the consolation that future generations will be freed from compulsion.[3] But the benefits to future generations are remote and doubtful. As Mr Frankel notes, railway construction 'will be justified on economic grounds only if, after the line has been built, the efforts of the population as a whole, including that of the porters, can be so redirected as to yield sufficient quantities of additional or more valuable goods, of a kind which can enter trade and bear the cost of railway transport'.[4] The completion of a line sets free a large volume of labour for employment on adjacent capitalist enterprises, but there remains a still larger surplus which can no longer find work, even as porters, and this opens up new problems.

Where railways are not needed to replace porters, their advantage to the native population is still more questionable. Liberals had no doubt on this point because they regarded progress as a guarantee of welfare. Now we have come to recognize that railways tend to meet the demand for export products at the expense of subsistence products.

[1] Burns, p. 209.
[2] *African Survey*, p. 1538.
[3] *Ib.* pp. 615, 628.
[4] Frankel, p. 6.

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653 Of recent years the construction of railways, like other projects of economic development, has usually been advocated on the ground that they would provide funds for welfare services. How far they have promoted welfare indirectly through opening up new fields for commerce and industry we must examine later, but here it is relevant to note that, except where they have served mining enterprise, they have usually been unremunerative and have 'made a serious reduction in the resources available for general expenditure'.[1] Some forms of expenditure on public works are not, like railways, open to the criticism that they deprive people of employment; irrigation, for instance, creates a new and permanent demand for native labour. But general experience shows that, as we have noticed in the Punjab, it tends to increase the mass of debt, leaving the peasant with a bare subsistence and, at best, no wealthier than before.

There is, indeed, no necessary connection for good or ill between public works and native welfare. We have seen that economic development, unless kept under control, is on the balance prejudicial to the welfare of the people; that is one reason for the modern departure from the Liberal doctrine of *laissez-faire*. Public works in general, whether roads, railways, airways, ports or irrigation, serve to expedite development, and thereby enhance the difficulty of protecting natives against its evil consequences. It would, for instance, be difficult to argue that railway construction in the Belgian Congo under Leopold improved the well-being of the natives. In Malaya we are told of a 'once flourishing Sakai village [which] has, since the road touched it, plainly deteriorated, physically and morally.'[2] Even irrigation works must be regarded as a failure from the standpoint of welfare if they merely enable more people to live more miserably. Thus the general belief in the intrinsic value of roads, railways and other forms of public works as instruments of native welfare must be dismissed as an illusion; only too often they do more harm than good to those whom they are supposed to benefit. Public works are instruments of economic progress, of world welfare, not of native welfare; sometimes in some ways they may improve the common lot, but they extend and intensify the action of economic forces and, without protection against these, they do not promote native welfare but enhance the need of measures to protect welfare.

[1] *Britain and Her Dependencies* p. 23; *African Survey*, pp. 1316, 1606.
[2] Malaya Census, 1931 ; 1